

The True Image of the Past Flits By: Walter Benjamin and the Brain on Alzheimer's

Maya Bernstein-Schalet

“Have you heard of ...?” My grandma trails off.
“Of...” She clears her throat.
“Of, of...”

I feel her grasping for the end of her sentence. How long do I wait this time before I jump in and save the thought? I can picture her clearly, crossing her legs and running her frail fingers through feathery hair. She's sitting on the long white couch at the apartment on 52nd street, but she might not know that. It's April 2020. In hospitals all over the city, New Yorkers are fighting to stay alive, but she might not know that either. The touch of Covid-19 is grasping our entire planet – and whenever I call from my own quarantined household, I wonder, does she know?

She clears her throat again. We've lost it.

“Of Walter Benjamin?”

I try to call every day, telling myself it's good for her to have as much human contact as possible – but truthfully, it's good for me too. I turned twenty-two on February 27th, days before the catastrophe of Covid turned life upside down. My future seems to matter less and less as the days go by. The world is ending just as my adulthood is beginning, so really, what's the point of dreaming? Instead, I call my grandma.

Each time we speak on the phone, my grandma tells me the story of Walter Benjamin's escape from Nazi Europe. On Monday, Benjamin mysteriously disappears en route to the

Pyrenees. On Tuesday, he escapes the Nazis on a ship headed to the Americas. On Wednesday, he dies along the way. On Thursday he perishes in Paris, on Friday he withers away in an internment camp, and on Saturday he is killed on a train. On Sunday, I can't bear to call.

It's not that I don't want to talk to her – I love speaking with my grandma, mostly. And Benjamin is a fascinating man, a German Jewish literary critic and philosopher whose work posthumously became some of the most seminal of the 20th century. It's that my grandma, a former literature professor and memory scholar, has Alzheimer's. She's not alone – in 2020, at least 5.8 million Americans had it, and that's just the known cases.¹

At that point, we didn't know exactly what was causing the dementia. But something was wrong. Even before the pandemic, her sentences started to move in loops.

“When I was a child, I took dance classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse,” she'd told us one night over dinner. She sits at the long wooden table in her signature black pants and black sweater, a quintessential New York academic even in her late 80s.

“And one time, a man with a guitar was there in the corner playing as we danced.” Her sentences are slow, careful. Each word takes effort. It's like she has extreme lethologica – difficulty remembering particular words or names – but with

every word and every name.

“And it turned out, that man was Woody Guthrie!”

In the time it took for my big Jewish family to pour a dozen cups of seltzer, squabble over how the lactose intolerant people left parmesan out of the now boring kale salad, and debate G-d’s pronouns – so, about five minutes – the loop begins again. My grandma turned to whoever was closest, and said, “When I was a child, I took dance classes at the Neighborhood Playhouse.” The more patient descendants in our ranks would politely listen to the story once again. But we all have our limits.

“Grandma!” we’d exclaim. “You just said that!”

Two years later, things had only gotten worse. Her outfit was the same each day, pajamas peeking out from under her black trousers, yesterday’s dinner staining her blouse. And her loops – oh, her loops! They were trying. It was impossible to maintain a conversation with her because she’d forget what you were talking about. When we spoke, I found myself brainstorming ways to politely excuse myself. I tried my best to be patient and caring with her, but it was all too easy to hold her to the standard of her former self. My stumbling twenty-two-year-old heart wanted her advice on living, but instead, I got Benjamin.

Walter Benjamin was born in Berlin in 1892 to a well-off Jewish family. From a young age, he displayed a curious mind, if not intellectual stubbornness. In the circles of bourgeois German youth, he became somewhat of a star, active in youth organizations and school reform movements. At once brilliant and beholden to his own abilities, Benjamin became a controversial figure. He did not struggle with confidence. He did, however, struggle with the sort of academic conformity required to succeed among the intelligentsia.

Today, it is easy to see where his issues arose. His thinking wandered the realms of literature, poetry, philosophy, history, economics, political science, religion, fine art, film, photography, architecture, and aesthetics. He did not fit into any box, and proudly so. His philosophy was poetic, and his literary theory was philosophical.

As her life began to yield more and more to the forces of Alzheimer’s, my grandma toted *Illuminations*, one of Benjamin’s essay collections, around like others cling to their iPhones. She read the same pages over and over again. Between the pages, she tucked pieces of ripped white paper, envelopes, cards, receipts, and other ephemera marked by her elegant scrawl. One such scrap contains a complete recipe for “Double Salmon Mousse.” On another, under a copied paragraph from *Illuminations*, she wrote, “Iconic white wine.” Much of her life could be mapped out in these scraps, from lofty intellectual ideas to what she was planning for dinner. Coincidentally, Benjamin was a man of scraps as well – his archives contain hundreds of them, something she would know from her reading. Benjamin’s life became my grandma’s final project, long before we knew it would be her last.

One rainy Wednesday, I took the 6 up to my grandparent’s apartment to make sure a Zoom appointment with a

dementia specialist went smoothly. When the doctor logged on – a younger blonde woman wearing a mask – she was friendly, gentle even. She asked a few basic questions about my grandma’s age, occupation, and health before she started a 15-minute memory test.

“Carol,” the doctor asked, “Can you tell me where you are right now?” My grandma paused, pondering. Before she could respond, my grandpa cut in – “At our home on 52nd street,” he said, in a move I’d come to recognize. He always stepped in for her, which used to strike me as a classic case of a man interrupting a woman. But as her dementia worsened, his interjections became a saving grace for her, a way for him to fill in her gaps. And, I’ve come to realize, to bear his own sorrow at her memory’s demise.

“Okay,” the doctor said. “Carol, can you tell me what year it is?”

Next to her, my grandpa began to whisper, too low for the Zoom to pick up but loud enough for me to realize what was happening. He was trying to give her the answers to her memory test.

“Grandpa,” I scolded him from across the room. “Grandma has to answer herself!”

“Carol,” the doctor repeated, “I’ll ask you again – can you tell me what year it is?”

Ruffled, my grandma stammered, clearly upset by the premise of the question. “Sometime in the twentieth century, I guess,” she finally responded. It was 2022.

The test continued – how many grandchildren does she have? Fifteen. In reality, there are only six of us. The doctor asked her to repeat back a sentence, and one minute later, she couldn’t remember what it was. Over the course of the next ten minutes, it became clear that she had a much looser grasp on reality than we’d previously thought.

Walter Benjamin was born in Berlin in 1892 to a well-off Jewish family. From a young age, he displayed a curious mind, if not intellectual stubbornness.

Dementia is a symptom of many forms of cognitive decline, including regular old aging. But this appointment revealed that she not only has Alzheimer’s, but also that it had advanced past the early stages of dementia. Our family knew, but we didn’t know it was that bad, in large part because my grandpa had hidden it from us for years.

I don’t think he did this maliciously. My grandparents were both college professors – he taught philosophy; she taught literature. Their seventy years together included global travel, friendships with the likes of Jürgen Habermas, Hannah Arendt, and Jacques Derrida, dozens of books, four children, six grandchildren, betrayal, reconciliation, and all the other

stuff of living. She was his wife, his intellectual partner, his confidante. I think he covered for her memory loss for so long because he couldn't bear to let her go.

I often wonder about the hours, days, years they spent alone together at the end of his life – how did the timbre of their relationship bend and fold as she lost her mind? Once, in the summer of 2020, he told me, “I’m not afraid of death. What I am afraid of, though, is losing my mental faculties.”

As my grandma’s memory got worse, I found myself searching for ways to ignite her brain. Part of me hoped that in conversation, I might be able to stop the process of neural decay. I know now that it’s mostly futile to fight Alzheimer’s attack on the hippocampus, the brain’s home to memory, and eventually everything else. But not unlike many relatives of the afflicted, clinical researchers, doctors, and patients themselves, I searched for some way out. And that way was Benjamin.

Benjamin was curious across genre, constantly going down dusty rabbit holes. He spent his days in libraries and archives, obsessed with the nooks and crannies of both the obscure and the obvious. My grandma was like this too, in a way – when her academic focus shifted from Victorian literature to cultural memory in the 1990s, she wrote about Marcel Ophus’ 1969 film *The Sorrow and the Pity*, Egyptologist Jan Assmann’s 1997 *Moses the Egyptian*, and the role dance plays in cultural memory as discussed in Amitav Ghosh’s “Dancing in Cambodia” – all in the same essay.²

She saw as much power and material in a Bill T. Jones dance piece as the bible, just like Benjamin’s dual interest in Kafka essays and *The Communist Manifesto*. In a 2007 article, she reflected that her field of comparative literature “brings together literary, philosophical, psychoanalytical, anthropological, and art-historical texts (among others) and reaches out toward the arts.”³ Like Benjamin, she resisted pigeon-holing her thinking, finding meaning everywhere in a world suffuse with representative forms.

Part of being human is the bending and shaping of our past to fit the narratives we craft about ourselves in our present moment.

The more I read of Benjamin, the more I started to notice an uncanny similarity between Benjamin’s theories of history and my grandma’s brain on Alzheimer’s. In *On the Concept of History*, Benjamin wrote, “The true image of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again.” One afternoon, when I opened my grandma’s copy of *Illuminations*, a scrap of torn white paper fell to the floor, on which “The true picture of the past flits by,” was scrawled not once, but twice. As I spent more time sifting through her notes for this essay, I found the phrase

again and again. Clearly, Benjamin’s writing spoke to her as well, especially as her dementia worsened – but why?

Rather than existing in a set temporality of past and present, Benjamin conceives the image of the past as grounded both in the moment in which it was captured and the now in which the image is perceived. As David S. Ferris describes in *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions*, “To Benjamin, history becomes legible and therefore readable through a relation of ‘what was’ with ‘now.’”⁴ For my grandma, remembering her life becomes legible through a relation of ‘what was’ and ‘now.’ There is no “true” image of the past – just a constant give and take between what happened in the past and what’s happening now. This image of the past is what Benjamin refers to as “the dialectical image.” In their impressive biography of Benjamin, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings define the dialectical image as “the crystallization of history in the present.”⁵ When telling the stories of her life, my grandma colors the past with the now, recounting a history that could never fit neatly into the mere linear nature of time.

Memory rarely fits into a neat relation of history and now. Part of being human is the bending and shaping of our past to fit the narratives we craft about ourselves in our present moment. But Alzheimer’s patients live in a constant dialectical image, even more so than the rest of us. Alzheimer’s kills neurons bit by bit, erasing bits and pieces of memory networks but not all at once. As the brain shrinks, so does history, the story of life that shapes everything about who we are.

For people who have dementia, it can seem like the brain is on a loop – which, basically, is what’s happening in the brain. That’s why each day of the week led to a new story of Walter Benjamin’s escape from Europe. My grandma had no memory of telling me the same story the day before, and since her memories were decaying, details tended to change depending on her mood. It’s not just that she will tell the story again and again – it’s also that each time, the story will change slightly, depending on what’s going on in the moment she tells it. The missteps aren’t all random, but scientists still don’t know why they happen. What they do know, and what anyone who spends time with someone who has Alzheimer’s can tell you, is that how someone remembers, what stays with them, and who they are fixated on can repeat on a mutable loop.

For example, my grandma loves pie, and she always has. Strawberry, blueberry, rhubarb. Apple, blackberry, pumpkin. Her crusts were perfectly flaky and browned. Her fillings were sugar-speckled, soft, juicy but never soggy. I have many memories of her baking pies for my cousins and me, of the moment the pie was brought to the table and we swooned in awe. Her pies made me feel close to her, like I had the stereotypical loving grandma who baked pies.

But she wasn’t the stereotype that my childhood self thought a grandma should be. She didn’t gush over her grandchildren or give wise, warm advice. When my mother asked her to babysit me on the day following 9/11, my grandmother said no. She was hosting her annual dinner with Derrida. Instead of knit socks and ugly holiday sweaters, my

grandma gifted me Charles Dickens and Edith Wharton novels. I don't have any memories of spending time alone with her until her memory started to decline. She didn't do "kid" stuff. She did smart stuff, always.

Now, I appreciate her for who she was, but back then, I yearned for a warmer love, the kind of soft envelopment I saw in movies and read about in books. I wanted a grandma who acted like who a grandma was supposed to be.

But oh, the pies! The pies were the one thing that she did that was grandmotherly. And we all loved it. Eventually, her Alzheimer's touched most areas of her life, pies included.

One afternoon in the summer of 2020, I helped my grandmother measure out a cup of flour for an apple pie. Once an expert baker, my grandma no longer remembers where her bowls are, or pans, or how to measure out a table-spoon. A cup of flour is elusive, as is preheating the oven, freezing the crust, and setting the oven timer. And yet, without any of her pie baking neural pathways, she'll still know she's making a pie with her granddaughters; she can see our crust, our apples laid out, her old roller set aside. I've learned to help her out with this:

"The recipe said one cup of flour in this measuring cup, right grandma?"

"This is the roller you used to use when my mom was growing up, right grandma?"

"You love apple pies, right grandma?"

She looked up from our dough and our flour and our apples, and, gazing out the window, started to remember.

"When I was teaching at a sort of college, there was snow," she said. "So I went for a ski, and when I came home, I made a pie." She'd told me this story many times in the preceding days, and it almost always included some version of the same details with something from the present thrown in. In one version, she came home and made a roast chicken, probably because we were making chicken for dinner that night. In another version, she traveled through a rainstorm, probably because it was raining outside. In another version, she never left home at all.

Did she really bake a pie on that day in history? Or is her brain combining her now with her past to create a memory that exists with hands in both jars?

My grandpa was pretty good at providing the details for a particular memory. But a couple months ago, my grandpa was admitted into the hospital for congestive heart failure. He was in and out of the hospital many times. He passed on July 4th, 2022. His hospitalization troubled, upset, and confused her. It troubled, upset and confused me too. He was one of my best friends, one of the only people who made me feel like it's okay to be the sensitive nerd I am. I'd bring him pickles in the hospital and we'd sit, side by side in his bed, reading. Sometimes, we'd read our own books. Other times, I'd read out loud to him, over the beeping of his heart monitor and the groans of his roommate. I resisted tears until I wound my way back out through the stuffy, winding hospital halls. I hated seeing his skeletal frame, dotted with rainbow

bruises and bloody needle pricks, languishing away in a flimsy green robe. He was so full of life. Now I had to learn how to let both of my grandparents go.

At least I could remember that my grandpa was sick and retain my memories enough to visit him. We decided as a family to keep my grandma from visiting him in the hospital to protect her from a devastating loop of upset. Instead, she stayed at their apartment on 52nd street, constantly wondering where her husband was. There's no Alzheimer's guidebook for how to deal with these situations, no way to know besides your knowledge of their fleeting personality and the strength of your love what the "right" thing to do is. Alone for the first time in decades, my grandma began to wander through her life with a more forceful disorientation than ever before. She wrote my grandpa a note that read,

Hi Dick, I'm staying for the night in the area where there's a kitchen, etc. (living room, etc.) I miss you so much! If you can please find me in the room with 4 dressers, next to a big bed... You will recognize it! Love, Carol.

That room was her bedroom, the same one she'd slept in for decades.

Once, we made the mistake of facetimeing him in the hospital, and the image of her emaciated husband in hospital robes and a breathing tube stayed with her through the night. She hadn't retained short term memory in years.

Anything that upset her would have the power to stick.

Despite my attempts at distraction, I couldn't lure her brain from the image of her husband in a hospital bed, not with the movie version of *Wuthering Heights* nor cream puffs for dessert, her favorite meal. I found her ability to remember events that set off strong emotions as eerie. She couldn't remember what year it was, how many grandchildren she has, or that she was in her own apartment, but she'd remember that my grandpa was in the hospital all right.

Strong emotions, particularly those needed for survival, are lodged in the limbic system, in a larger network than just the hippocampus. This could explain the survival of short-term memories that ignite anger or fear for my grandma, even as other instances simply disappear. It wasn't always traumatic things that stuck with her – one time I took her Eileen Fisher coat, and two weeks later she asked me when I was planning to give it back. Anything that upset her would have the power to stick. Another time, she recounted two longtime friends' struggle with infidelity in their marriage repeatedly, though I'm sure she could not name the president nor the month of the year.

In one of my grandma's articles, an analysis of Freud, Derrida, Benjamin and the storytelling of mourning, she pinpointed how, in Benjamin's literary essays,

A figure or a culture from seems to reach across barriers of loss and temporality for one last reappearance: the storyteller arises, diminished in stature, from a landscape devastated by technology and war... Such historical encrypting resembles in turn the interiorization of mourning, in which a lost object becomes introjected or incorporated in the mourner, only to be revealed in a figurative form.⁶

Could it be that in her late life, my grandma had become such a storyteller, reaching across barriers of loss and temporality? It was clear that she had internalized her fear, and later on, her mourning.

The landscape of her life as she knew it was devastated by my grandpa's death. The day after he died, we sat on the couch, and as if by magic but really by mourning, her memory returned. "Why didn't anybody tell me he was sick," she asked, clutching my hand. An hour later, listening to my mother's laugh about something in the kitchen, she turned to me and said, "How could anybody laugh at a time like this?"

The last time her short-term memory stretched for over an hour was at least a year and a half prior. It felt like her personality came back, too. She got up from the table, explaining, "I'm just going to check and see if they're putting the dishes in the washer in the correct way." As she stood, she noticed we'd left pillows on the furniture outside. Turning back to me, she said, "Shouldn't somebody bring those in?"

When my grandpa was in the hospital, she usually couldn't even remember that the person she was missing was my grandpa. But the feeling of missing someone stuck with her, even as the details slipped her mind. One morning, on one of her typical scraps, she wrote,

What's on my mind is the person who is not there. He has written the most beautiful love poem: a real treasure.

As much as this note it is representative of the process of her decay (instead of her husband, my grandpa is described as "the person who is not there"), it is also representative of the crystallization that emerges from those fragments of the past and the now – figurative forms that once upon a time, she'd be the first to point out. Undoubtedly, she couldn't have written this note, wouldn't have written this note, if she didn't have Alzheimer's.

Hannah Arendt described Benjamin's thinking as a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, carrying hidden pearls from murky depths up to the surface. "What guides this thinking is the conviction that although the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things 'suffer a sea-change' and survive in new crystallized forms."⁷

Most people who love a person struggling with Alzheimer's probably wouldn't describe their hybrid past-present memories as pearls. But in a sense, the process of neural decay is a

process of crystallization. Elements of what once was survive in what is. The past shows up in unexpected ways, jumbled, up to interpretation – but almost always uniquely intertwined with the now. Memory, the snap and spark of those neural pathways guiding us through life, might be seen as the pearl diver. For my grandma, the thought fragments wrested from the past are constantly crystallizing into new forms and shapes.

Sometimes, the stories that go awry strike me as brilliant. I like her revisionist histories. I think they open up possibilities that, if the rest of us weren't so wedded to the "truth," could be quite compelling to consider. What if Walter Benjamin didn't die on that fateful day on the French-Spanish border? What if my grandma's version of the story in which he lived actually did happen?

Loving and caring for someone with Alzheimer's is so, so hard. In the week after my grandpa's death, it broke my heart to hold her hand as she relearned, day by day, that he had passed. In general, watching her decline breaks my heart – and can be quite annoying to experience. There's no stopping it, no slowing it down, no way to understand how it happens or why. But it happens anyway, whether we like it or not.

The more I've embraced my grandma's pearls, each version of the story, each rendition of the memory, the more I've come to appreciate the brain's ability to function, even in severe decay. For example, I think her sentence scrambles are linguistically fascinating. During her memory test, she was asked to spell out a word that I, funnily enough, cannot remember – but it was something like the word rest, which, when asked to spell forward and backward, she first spelled r-e-s-t and then t-s-e-r-w. Wrest.

Some dementia and Alzheimer's experts advocate for a certain kind of patience and appreciation that can feel contrary to nature. Because, of course, we want to pull our loved ones back, to stop the process, to keep their neurons from decay. In other words, we don't want to let them go. I hate that my grandma is forgetting the apartment that she has called home for decades. I hate that she is forgetting how to take care of her body. I hate that one day, a 'now' will come in which I become unrecognizable. I hate that one day, a 'now' will come when my grandma becomes unrecognizable to herself, the moment when the continuity of the past and present is discontinued forever.

But what if there is something freeing in the slow decay of a life of memories? For example, a sort of flexible recollection that aims not to capture a fleeting truth of an experience, but rather the truth of the past in the now. Is there a way to see this process as one that also produces pearls? Every sensation, every emotion, every taste, sight, sound, and touch, is mediated through my grandma's kaleidoscopic grasp on what is right in front of her. She is truly always in the present.

I'm not claiming that forgetting the details of an important work call or, alternatively, how to go to the bathroom, can unlock beautiful worlds of gorgeous depths. And of course, there are realms in which the truth of a memory is

And of course, there are realms in which the truth of a memory is vitally important – say, someone’s blood type if they need a lifesaving transfusion, or what really went down during a military coup...

vitally important – say, someone’s blood type if they need a lifesaving transfusion, or what really went down during a military coup, or just how brutal a certain colonizing country was.

However, memories are fallible, for Alzheimer’s patients and everyone else, and there’s no shame in seeing them that way. We spend our lives carefully constructing intricate neural pathways, constellations of memory with astonishing capability. Still, those pathways are never truly set in stone. Memory is fallible, untrustworthy, and constantly in flux – for all humans, not just those among us who develop Alzheimer’s. When we let go of our need for memories to convey an

objective, scientific truth, whole worlds emerge in the depths. All we have to do is dive.

Just now, I called up my grandma to ask her about some of the details of this essay that I’d forgotten. I told her I was writing an essay about Benjamin. Then I asked her who that famous guitar player was who played in her dance class, and how many years she was with my grandpa, and what year she was born. Some of these facts came to her – most of them didn’t. Before I hung up, as I always do, I reminded her that I love her, to which she said, “I love you too.” And then, after a long pause, “Have you heard of Walter Benjamin?”

Notes

1 Center for Disease Control, “Alzheimer’s Disease and Healthy Aging,” [cdc.gov/aging/aginginfo/alzheimers.html](https://www.cdc.gov/aging/aginginfo/alzheimers.html), accessed August 23, 2022.

2 Carol L. Bernstein, “Beyond the Archive: Cultural Memory in Dance and Theater,” *Journal of Research Practice*, 3(2), Article M14. Retrieved August 11, 2022 from <http://jrp.icaap.org/index.php/jrp/article/view/110/98>.

3 Ibid.

4 David S. Ferris, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Theoretical Questions* (Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1996), 10–11.

5 Howard Eiland and Michael William Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), 614.

6 Carol L. Bernstein, “A Surplus of Melancholy: The Discourse of Mourning in Freud, Benjamin, and Derrida,” *Poligrafia: Revista de Literatura Comparada*, 3 (1998–2000), 9–27.

7 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (Boston ; New York: Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019), lxiii. This book is one that my grandma would carry around with her for months at a time.